

UNDERSTANDING THE POWER OF THE COURT:
OBTAINING EXPUNGEMENT OF COURT RECORDS AFTER
DISMISSAL OR ACQUITTAL

Wisconsin State Public Defender's Office
2010 Annual Criminal Defense Conference
Milwaukee, Wisconsin
November 4, 2010
9:30 a.m. - 10:30 a.m.
Lakeshore Ballroom

The principle that there is a presumption of innocence in favor of the accused is the undoubted law, axiomatic and elementary, and its enforcement lies at the foundation of the administration of our criminal law.

Coffin v. United States, 156 U.S. 432, 453 (1895).

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I. Negative Implications for a Criminal Charge Follow An Accused Even After Dismissal of All Charges or Acquittal.

- A. Wisconsin law prohibits discrimination in employment and licensing based upon "arrest record" or "conviction record" in employment or licensing (WIS. STAT. § 111.321) with some exceptions (*see* WIS. STAT. § 111.335). The "arrest record" protection includes individuals who were arrested for a crime though the charges were later dismissed, or those who were acquitted of the charged offense.
- B. An individual who is charged with a crime, even if charges are later dismissed faces the negative credential of a court record which shows the initial charge. Likewise, a court record remains for an individual charged with a crime who was acquitted at trial. In either instance, the negative credential remains and can be easily misunderstood or misused by landlords, license providers and employers.
1. We know this because we hear about the experiences of our clients.
 2. The indigent are impacted more significantly than wealthy individuals because they do not typically have access to legal representation before a criminal charge issues. Individuals accused of a crime with financial resources (and who know of the importance of pre-charging representation) may be able to afford an attorney before a charge issues to attempt to persuade a prosecutor not to file a case. Even if the indigent individual later obtains dismissal, the record of the criminal case exists.
 3. Negative implications of a criminal charge, even after dismissal or acquittal, have also been studied.
 - a. Princeton University sociology professor Devah Pager has summarized research on the "experimental approach to the study of criminal stigma" and found:

The most notable in this line of research is a classic study by Richard Schwartz and Jerome Skolnick in which the researchers prepared four sets of résumés to be presented to prospective employers for an unskilled hotel job. The four conditions included: (1) an applicant who had been convicted and sentenced for assault; (2) an applicant who had been tried for assault but acquitted; (3) an applicant who had been tried for assault, acquitted, *and* had a letter from the judge certifying the applicant's acquittal and emphasizing the presumption of innocence; and (4) an applicant who had no criminal record. Employers' interest in candidates declined as a function of the severity of the criminal record, though in all three criminal conditions - even with a letter from the judge "certifying the finding of not guilty and reaffirming the legal presumption of innocence" - applicants were less likely to be considered by employers than the non-criminal control. **The findings of this study suggest that mere contact with the criminal justice system can have significant repercussions, with records of "arrest," "conviction," and "incarceration" conveying a stigma differing in degree but not kind.** Several later studies, both in the United States and in other countries, have extended Schwartz and Skolnick's design. Each of these studies reports a similar finding that, all else being equal, contact with the criminal justice system leads to worse employment opportunities.

DEVAH PAGER, MARKED: RACE, CRIME, AND FINDING WORK IN A ERA OF MASS INCARCERATION, 49 - 50 (The University of Chicago Press, 2007)(emphasis supplied).

b. Professor Pager also noted:

Currently, even those states prohibiting discrimination on the basis of criminal background [including Wisconsin] continue to allow employers full access to information about criminal backgrounds [as Wisconsin does, generally], despite the fact that in most cases they are not supposed to use it. This policy is somewhat incongruous, especially given that other protected categories place corresponding restrictions on access to “incriminating” information: employers are not permitted to ask the age of applicants, nor their marital status; and information about the race of applicants, while often collected for EEOC reporting requirements, is always optional.

Id. at 154.

II. Wisconsin statutes regarding sealing court records.

- A. Individuals, under 25 years of age, may have misdemeanor and some felony convictions expunged. WIS. STAT. § 973.015.
- B. An individual who was adjudicated delinquent may petition the judge for expunction of the juvenile record, once the age of 17 is reached. WIS. STAT. § 938.355.
- C. Fingerprint records maintained by the Wisconsin Department of Justice may be expunged for individuals arrested “and subsequently released without charge, or cleared of the offense through court proceedings[.]” WIS. STAT. § 165.84.
- D. There is no statutory authority for expungement of a court record for an individual for whom criminal charges were dismissed or an acquittal was reached.

III. SUPREME COURT RULE CH. 72

- A. SUPREME COURT RULE 72.01 describes retention periods for court records.
- B. SUPREME COURT RULE 72.06 describes “expunction” and advises what the clerk of court is to do “[w]hen required by statute *or* court order to expunge a court record[.]” (Emphasis supplied.)

IV. *In the Matter of: The Petition of the State Bar of Wisconsin to Modify Chapter 72 of the Supreme Court Rules, No. 09-07 (Oct. 27, 2009).*

- A. A rules petition requests that the Wisconsin Supreme Court modify its rules. *See* WIS. STAT. § 751.12.
- B. The State Bar of Wisconsin asked the Wisconsin Supreme Court to modify SUPREME COURT RULE CH. 72 to make clear that circuit court judges have the inherent and equitable authority to seal (paper and online) court records in cases of dismissal or acquittal.
- C. The History of the proposed Petition before the State Bar of Wisconsin:
 - 1. Gerry Mowris (on behalf of the Criminal Law Section of the State Bar of Wisconsin) and Erik R. Guenther (on behalf of the Individual Rights and Responsibilities Section of the State Bar of Wisconsin) authored a Petition seeking to modify the Supreme Court Rules governing retention and expunction of court records.
 - 2. The Petition was heard as an informational item by the State Bar Board of Governors Executive Committee on April 24, 2009. The Petition was presented by Mowris and Guenther as an information item to the full Board of Governors on May 6, 2009.

3. The State Bar Board of Governors voted unanimously to support the Petition on June 26, 2010. Mowris and Guenther were available to answer questions.

D. Procedural Posture before the Wisconsin Supreme Court:

1. For a description of the rule-making process before the Wisconsin Supreme Court, *see* SUPREME COURT INTERNAL OPERATING PROCEDURES § III.
2. The Petition was filed before the Wisconsin Supreme Court on June 30, 2009. An amended Petition was filed on October 27, 2009.
3. A public hearing before the Wisconsin Supreme Court was held on February 26, 2010. *See* WIS. STAT. § 751.12(3). Guenther testified on behalf of the State Bar of Wisconsin. A large number of members of the public also testified with the vast majority in favor of the Petition. (Video of the hearing, including discussion by the Court, is available at http://www.wiseye.org/wisEye_programming/ARCHIVES-sct_2010.html).
4. The Wisconsin Supreme Court also discussed this issue at an hearing on October 4, 2010. (The video is available at http://www.wiseye.org/wisEye_programming/ARCHIVES-sct_2011.html)
5. The Wisconsin Supreme Court has not yet issued a ruling on the Petition.

E. Special Committee on Review of Records Access of Circuit Court Documents.

1. This Committee is chaired by State Representative Kelda Roys.

2. This charge of the Committee is:

The Special Committee is directed to review how, and by whom, circuit court civil and criminal records may be accessed through the Wisconsin Circuit Court Automation (WCCA) Program. The issues to be considered by the committee include: (a) the length of time a record remains accessible through WCCA; (b) whether accessibility of a record through WCCA should depend on how far a civil or criminal proceeding has progressed; and (c) whether records of proceedings that have: (1) been vacated or dismissed; or (2) resulted in acquittal or other form of exoneration should continue to be accessible through WCCA.

3. My presentation before the Committee is available here:
http://www.legis.state.wi.us/lc/committees/study/2010/CTDOC/files/sep15_guenther_presentation.pdf.

V. The Authority for A Circuit Court Judge to Seal a Court Record Following Dismissal or Acquittal.

A. Wisconsin Constitution.

Every person is entitled to a certain remedy in the laws for all injuries, or wrongs which he may receive in his person, property, or character; he ought obtain justice freely, and without being obligated to purchase it, completely and without denial, promptly and without delay, conformably with the laws.

WIS. CONST., Art. I, § 9

B. Inherent Authority.

1. A circuit court possess the inherent authority to limit access to records in the interest of justice. *State ex rel. Bilder ex rel. v. Township of Delevan*, 112 Wis. 2d 539, 556-57, 334 N.W.2d 252 (1983). The inherent powers of a court include all of those powers which are "essential to the expedition and proper conducting of judicial business." *In re Janitor of the Supreme Court*, 35 Wis. 410, 419 (1874).
2. "It is uncontested [...] that the right to inspect and copy judicial records in not absolute. Every court has supervisory power over its own records, and access has been denied where court files might have become a vehicle for improper purposes." *Nixon v. Warner Communications, Inc.*, 435 U.S. 589, 598 (1978).
3. The inherent powers of a court include all of those powers which are "essential to the expedition and proper conducting of judicial business." *In re Janitor of the Supreme Court*, 35 Wis. 410, 419 (1874).
4. Inherent powers are those that "'have been conceded to courts because they are courts. Such powers have been conceded because without them they could neither maintain their dignity, transact their business, nor accomplish the purposes of their existence.'" *Jacobson v. Avestruz*, 81 Wis. 2d 240, 245, 260 N.W.2d 267 (1977) (quoting *State v. Cannon*, 196 Wis. 534, 536-37, 221 N.W. 603 (1928)).
5. In sum, "[t]he inherent power of the court is [...] the power to administer justice whether any previous form of remedy has been granted or not [...] and the power to provide process where none exists." *Cannon*, 196 Wis. at 536 (internal quotation omitted).

6. Though unlikely to apply to expungement of court records, the Wisconsin Supreme Court has recently declined to invoke inherent authority in free-standing "in the interest of justice" claims for a new trial. *State v. Henley*, 2010 WI 97, 787 N.W.2d 350 (2010).

C. Equitable Authority.

Equitable authority "is a variant of the inherent authority doctrine. It permits a court to grant equitable remedies to private litigants in situations in which there is no explicit statutory authority or in which the available legal remedy is inadequate to do complete justice." *In Interest of E.C.*, 130 Wis.2d 376, 387 N.W.2d 72 (1986).

D. Factual basis.

1. Demonstrate why the Court ought exercise its inherent and equitable authority in the case of your client.
2. Advise your client to document specific harm caused (or inferred) by the presence of the online (and if applicable, paper) court record.
 - a. Keep track of all applications for employment, housing and loans.
 - b. National companies are often unaware of Wisconsin's prohibition on employment discrimination based on arrest record. National companies are more likely to be candid in advising that a client failed a background check.

E. The court issuing an expungement order is a discretionary decision. Please contact me to advise me of success (of failure) in raising this issue before a circuit court judge. Also, I am happy to assist you if you are contemplating an appeal of a circuit court order denying expungement based upon inherent or equitable authority.

- F. Success before a circuit court judge would allow for sealing of court records, but not records of other entities like law enforcement or a prosecutorial agency.
1. In *State v. Leitner*, 253 Wis. 2d 449, 472 - 473, 646 N.W.2d 341, 352 - 353 (2002), the Wisconsin Supreme Court held that expungement applies only to court records and not to records of agencies other than the courts.
 2. The Wisconsin Supreme Court extensively discussed the inherent authority of the circuit courts in *In the Interest E.C.*, 130 Wis. 2d 376, 387 N.W.2d 72 (1986). The issue in *E.C.* was whether courts had inherent or equitable authority to order expungement of juvenile *police* records when a juvenile delinquency petition was eventually dismissed. *Id.*, 130 Wis. 2d at 379. The court held that circuit courts do not have the inherent authority to order expungement of *police* records, in large part because the records are under statutory control and under the authority of the chief of police.

About the author:

Erik R. Guenther is an attorney with Hurley, Burish & Stanton, S.C., in Madison, Wisconsin. He represents individuals and businesses, throughout Wisconsin, in criminal inquiries from pre-charging/investigation to trial. Erik also takes on pardon applications, expungement petitions and post-conviction matters. Finally, he also assists business entities in internal investigations of possible employee misconduct. He is a graduate of Carthage College, *magna cum laude*, where he attended as a Lincoln Scholar, and the University of Wisconsin Law School.

To date, Erik has litigated serious criminal matters in 29 of Wisconsin's counties. He has handled cases in both federal districts in Wisconsin and the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals. He also served as a consultant in constitutional law and trial strategy issues in Michigan (resulting in dismissal of "disorderly house" citations against 94 individuals) and Afghanistan (resulting in acquittals on weapon smuggling charges for four defendants). In conjunction with the ACLU, Erik achieved dismissal and expungement of "disorderly house" citations issued to almost 450 individuals in the "Racine rave" case in 2002 and was recognized as the 2003 ACLU "Volunteer Attorney of the Year" for his *pro bono* work on the cases. To avoid a civil rights lawsuit, Racine also agreed to revise the flawed ordinance at issue and to provide training to the Racine Police Department on Fourth Amendment issues. Erik recently authored an amicus brief in *Siefert v. Alexander*, __ F.3d. __ (7th. Cir., 2010) relating to restrictions on judicial speech in Wisconsin.

Erik has been recognized as a top litigator by the Wisconsin Law Journal, In Business magazine and repeatedly by peers in the *Wisconsin Super Lawyers*® survey. He was profiled in the 2007 *Wisconsin Super Lawyers*® magazine in an article titled "Peer Recognition: How Erik Guenther Gets Juries to Sympathize with Clients Accused of Sexual Assault."

In 2007 - 2008, Erik's passion for the rule of law and individual rights took him to Afghanistan. He served as the Defense Mentor for the U.S. State Department funded Justice Sector Support Program, training Afghan defense lawyers. He was recognized as the Dane County Criminal Defense Bar Association "Warrior of the Year" for his service.

In 2008, the *Wisconsin State Journal* profiled Erik in a front-page story, describing him as a "rising star in the state legal establishment and already a teacher in cutting-edge legal issues and a civil liberties expert."

He is the youngest board president in the history of the American Civil Liberties Union of Wisconsin (ACLU-WI) and a past chair of the State Bar of Wisconsin Individual Rights and Responsibilities Section. Erik also is the Chair of the Wisconsin Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers (WACDL) Strike Force providing consultation and, in some cases, representation to lawyers who are being investigated based upon the defense of their clients.

He is accepted to practice before the International Criminal Court (The Hague, Netherlands) as part of the Assistants to Counsel registry.

BY G. MOWRIS & E. GUENTHER.

STATE OF WISCONSIN
SUPREME COURT

IN THE MATTER OF:

THE PETITION OF THE STATE BAR OF WISCONSIN
TO MODIFY CHAPTER 72 OF
THE SUPREME COURT RULES (PETITION 09-07)

**AMENDED PETITION TO MODIFY CHAPTER 72 OF THE WISCONSIN
SUPREME COURT RULES**

TO: The Honorable Justices of the Supreme Court

On June 26, 2009, the Board of Governors of the State Bar of Wisconsin, acting pursuant to the recommendation of the Criminal Law Section and the Individual Rights and Responsibilities Section, voted unanimously to petition this Court for an order revising Chapter 72 of the Wisconsin Supreme Court Rules. The reasons for this petition and a description of the proposed change are described in the attached memorandum supporting this petition.

Proposed Change to SCR Chapter 72

The State Bar of Wisconsin seeks this change in order to codify the

inherent authority of Wisconsin courts to manage their own files and determine when they ought be made public. The proposed change would clarify the language in Wis. SCR § 72.06 to provide clearer direction to circuit court judges. The State Bar of Wisconsin includes judges, prosecutors, criminal defense attorneys and civil rights attorneys among its members.

It is proposed that Chapter 72 of the Supreme Court Rules be modified to read as follows:

SCR CHAPTER 72

RETENTION AND MAINTENANCE OF COURT RECORDS

SCR 72.01 Retention of original record.

[unchanged]

SCR 72.015 Retention of original felony, misdemeanor, forfeiture and ordinance records.

The time periods for retention of case files, court records and minute records referred to in rule SCR 72.01 concerning felony, misdemeanor, forfeiture and ordinance cases apply to the type of case at the time of the final disposition of the case, rather than the type of case when the file was opened. For any felony, misdemeanor, forfeiture and ordinance cases with multiple counts, the longest retention period of any one count after final disposition applies to all counts in that case.

SCR 72.06 Expunction.

(1) A court may order a court record expunged under any of the following circumstances:

- (a) When authorized or required to do so by statute.
- (b) On the motion of any party to a case at or after the expiration of the minimum retention period as found under §72.01 for the type of case represented by the final disposition of the matter.
- (c) Upon dismissal of the case, or in the event of a judgment of acquittal, if a court believes expunction is necessary and appropriate:
 - 1. In the interest of justice; and
 - 2. The court finds, either at the time of the dismissal of the case or within a reasonable period of time thereafter, that a party to the case would benefit and society would not be harmed by expunction, either at the time of the dismissal of the case or within a reasonable period of time thereafter.

(2) ~~When required by statute or court order to expunge~~ expunging a court record, the clerk of the court shall do all of the following:

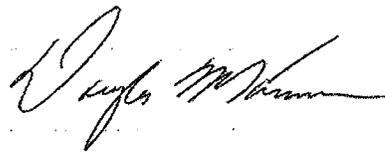
- (1) ~~(a)~~ Remove any paper index and nonfinancial court record and place them in the case file.
- (2) ~~(b)~~ Electronically remove any automated nonfinancial record, except the case number.
- (3) ~~(c)~~ Seal the entire case file.
- (4) ~~(d)~~ Destroy expunged court records in accordance with the provisions of this chapter.
- (e) Notify the Department of Justice of the expunction of the court record pursuant to Wis. Stats., §165.83(2)(A).

Conclusion.

As further explained in the attached memorandum, the State Bar of Wisconsin seeks the proposed changes in order to clarify the authority of the trial court to exercise its “supervisory power over its own records and files” (*Nixon*, 425 U.S. at 597) in the manner described in the proposed revised Wis. SCR § 72.06.

Respectfully submitted, October 27, 2009.

On Behalf of the State Bar of Wisconsin



Atty. Douglas W. Kammer

President, State Bar of Wisconsin

STATE OF WISCONSIN
SUPREME COURT

IN THE MATTER OF:

THE PETITION OF THE STATE BAR OF WISCONSIN
TO MODIFY CHAPTER 72 OF
THE SUPREME COURT RULES (PETITION 09-07)

**MEMORANDUM IN SUPPORT OF AMENDED PETITION 09-07, FILED BY
THE STATE BAR OF WISCONSIN TO MODIFY CHAPTER 72 OF THE
WISCONSIN SUPREME COURT RULES**

TO: The Honorable Justices of the Supreme Court

On October 27, 2009, the State Bar of Wisconsin filed an amended version of Petition 09-07, which it originally filed with the Court on June 30, 2009. This memorandum is filed in support of that amended petition.

On June 26, 2009, the Board of Governors of the State Bar of Wisconsin, acting pursuant to the recommendation of the Criminal Law Section and the Individual Rights and Responsibilities Section, voted unanimously to petition this Court for an order revising Chapter 72 of the Wisconsin Supreme Court Rules. The reasons for this petition and a description of the proposed change are

described below.

I. The Proposed Change

The State Bar of Wisconsin seeks this change in order to codify the inherent authority of Wisconsin courts to manage their own files and determine when they ought be made public. The proposed change would clarify the language in Wis. SCR § 72.06 to provide clearer direction to circuit court judges. The State Bar of Wisconsin includes judges, prosecutors, criminal defense attorneys and civil rights attorneys among its members.

Wis. SCR § 72.06 currently provides:

When required by statute *or court order* to expunge a court record, the clerk of the court shall do all of the following:

- (1) Remove any paper index and nonfinancial court record and place them in the case file.
- (2) Electronically remove any automated nonfinancial record, except the case number.
- (3) Seal the entire case file.
- (4) Destroy expunged court records in accordance with the provisions of this chapter.

(Emphasis supplied.)

As set forth in the attached amended petition, the State Bar proposes that Chapter 72 of the Supreme Court Rules be modified to create Wis. SCR § 72.015, which would read as follows:

SCR 72.015 Retention of original felony, misdemeanor, forfeiture and ordinance records.

The time periods for retention of case files, court records and minute records referred to in rule SCR 72.01 concerning felony, misdemeanor, forfeiture and ordinance cases apply

to the type of case at the time of the final disposition of the case, rather than the type of case when the file was opened. For any felony, misdemeanor, forfeiture and ordinance cases with multiple counts, the longest retention period of any one count after final disposition applies to all counts in that case.

Further, it is also proposed that Wis. SCR § 72.06 be amended to include as Wis. SCR § 72.06(1) the following language:

SCR 72.06 Expunction.

- (1) A court may order a court record expunged under any of the following circumstances:
- (a) When authorized or required to do so by statute.
 - (b) On the motion of any party to a case at or after the expiration of the minimum retention period as found under §72.01 for the type of case represented by the final disposition of the matter.
 - (c) Upon dismissal of the case, or in the event of a judgment of acquittal, if a court believes expunction is necessary and appropriate:
 - 1. In the interest of justice; and
 - 2. The court finds, either at the time of the dismissal of the case or within a reasonable period of time thereafter, that a party to the case would benefit and society would not be harmed by expunction, either at the time of the dismissal of the case or within a reasonable period of time thereafter.

Additionally, it is proposed that Wis. SCR § 72.06 be further amended to include Wis. SCR § 72.06(2) reading as follows:

- (2) ~~When required by statute or court order to expunge~~ expunging a court record, the clerk of the court shall do all of the following:
- ~~(1)~~ (a) Remove any paper index and nonfinancial court record and place them in the case file.
 - ~~(2)~~ (b) Electronically remove any automated nonfinancial record, except the case number.
 - ~~(3)~~ (c) Seal the entire case file.
 - ~~(4)~~ (d) Destroy expunged court records in accordance with the provisions of this chapter.
 - (e) Notify the Department of Justice of the expunction of the court record pursuant to Wis. Stats., §165.83(2)(A).

II. Summary

The Wisconsin Statutes prohibit discrimination based upon "arrest record" or "conviction record" in employment or licensing (WIS. STAT. § 111.321) with some exceptions (*see* WIS. STAT. § 111.335). The "arrest record" protection includes individuals who were arrested for a crime though the charges were later dismissed, or those who were acquitted of the charged offense.

Individuals, under 25 years of age, may have misdemeanor and certain felony convictions expunged. WIS. STAT. § 973.015. Also, an individual who was adjudicated delinquent may petition the judge for expunction of the juvenile record, once the age of 17 is reached. WIS. STAT. § 938.355.

Fingerprint records maintained by the Wisconsin Department of Justice may be expunged for individuals arrested "and subsequently released without charge, or cleared of the offense through court proceedings[.]" WIS. STAT. § 165.84.

There is no statutory authority for expungement of a court record for an individual for whom criminal charges were dismissed or an acquittal was reached. However, as described further, a trial court has the inherent authority to

expunge a record maintained by the Clerk of Courts (as well as the record maintained on CCAP) for any case, including those who were not convicted of a crime. This is consistent with WIS. CONST., Art. I, § 9, stating:

Every person is entitled to a certain remedy in the laws for all injuries, or wrongs which he may receive in his person, property, or character; he ought obtain justice freely, and without being obligated to purchase it, completely and without denial, promptly and without delay, conformably with the laws.

As described in detail below, the proposed change will codify this authority in the Supreme Court Rules to provide clear guidance to lower courts as to the scope of their authority to expunge court records. It will clearly advise trial level court judges, defense lawyers and prosecutors, that authority exists to expunge court records for individuals for whom charges were dismissed or not proven, or when the retention period has concluded.

III. Legal Authority

A. *The Authority of Expunction Resides In the Inherent Authority of the Circuit Court.*

A circuit court possess the inherent authority to limit access to records in the interest of justice. *State ex rel. Bilder ex rel. v. Township of Delevan*, 112 Wis. 2d 539, 556-57, 334 N.W.2d 252 (1983). The inherent powers of a court include all of those powers which are "essential to the expeditious and proper conducting of

judicial business." *In re Janitor of the Supreme Court*, 35 Wis. 410, 419 (1874).¹ This

Court stated that:

The authorities, in so far as any can be found on the subject, are to the effect that a constitutional court of general jurisdiction has inherent power to protect itself against any action that would unreasonably curtail its powers or materially impair its efficiency. A county board has no power to even attempt to impede the functions of such a court, and no such power could be conferred upon it.

¹ The State Bar is aware that the conclusion of this Petition - that a court has the inherent authority to control the access to its records - is contrary to the conclusion reached in 70 Op. Atty. Gen. 115 (1981). The Attorney General's opinion and this Petition are in accord that the answer likely depends "on an analysis of the inherent or implied powers of a court," (*Id.* at 116) but the State Bar believes that expunction, beyond that described by statute, is included within such inherent powers.

We note that the Attorney General's opinion did not address WIS. CONST., Art. I, § 9, the U.S. Supreme Court opinion in *Nixon v. Warner Communications, Inc.*, 435 U.S. 589 (1978) (discussed throughout the Petition), nor does it address equitable authority. Equitable authority "is a variant of the inherent authority doctrine. It permits a court to grant equitable remedies to private litigants in situations in which there is no explicit statutory authority or in which the available legal remedy is inadequate to do complete justice." *In Interest of E.C.*, 130 Wis.2d 376, 387 N.W.2d 72 (1986). Here the limited statutory expunction remedy is "inadequate to do complete justice," especially in cases where the retention period has concluded or when, in cases resulting in dismissal or acquittal, expunction is "in the interest of justice" and "a party to the case would benefit and society would not be harmed by expunction[.]" See proposed SCR 72.06(1).

This Court authored the *In Interest of E.C.* opinion, cited at page 8 - 9 of this Petition, five years after the Attorney General opinion. Authority for expungement, beyond that prescribed by statute, also rests with the equitable authority of the court. Further, the *Nixon* opinion provides: "It is uncontested [...] that the right to inspect and copy judicial records is not absolute. Every court has supervisory power over its own records and files, and access has been denied where court files might have become a vehicle for improper purposes." 435 U.S. at 598.

We note that "[a]n Attorney General's opinion is only entitled to such persuasive effect as the court deems the opinion warrants." *State v. Gilbert*, 115 Wis.2d 371, 380, 340 N.W.2d 511, 516 (1983) (quoted source omitted). "[T]he attorney general is not the official advisor [...] of courts or judges in the performance of their judicial functions," (20 Op. Atty. Gen. 926, 927 (1931)), and "it is not the official duty of [...] the attorney general to advise judges or courts." 20 Op. Atty. Gen. 937 (1931). Such opinions are offered for guidance to non-judicial actors when there is an ambiguity in the law. This Petition requests that this Court clarify the ambiguity regarding the circuit court's inherent or equitable power and find that circuit courts have the authority to control their own records, as affirmed by the very existence of SCR 72.

In re Court Room, 148 Wis. 109, 121, 134 N.W. 490 (1912).

In *Latham v. Casey & King Corp.*, 23 Wis. 2d 311, 314, 127 N.W.2d 225 (1964)(internal citations omitted), this Court stated:

The general control of the judicial business before [the court] is essential to the court if it is to function. Every court has inherent power, exercisable in its sound discretion, consistent within the Constitution and statutes, to control disposition of causes on its docket with economy of time and effort.

In addition to the powers expressly granted to the courts in the Constitution, courts have "inherent, implied and incidental powers. These terms 'are used to describe those powers which must necessarily be used' to enable the judiciary to accomplish its constitutionally or legislatively mandated functions." *Friedrich v. Dane County Cir. Ct.*, 192 Wis. 2d 1, 16, 531 N.W.2d 32 (1995)(internal citations omitted). Inherent powers are those that "'have been conceded to courts because they are courts. Such powers have been conceded because without them they could neither maintain their dignity, transact their business, nor accomplish the purposes of their existence.'" *Jacobson v. Avestruz*, 81 Wis. 2d 240, 245, 260 N.W.2d 267 (1977) (quoting *State v. Cannon*, 196 Wis. 534, 536-37, 221 N.W. 603 (1928)).

There are generally three areas in which a court may exercise its inherent

authority: (1) with regard to the internal operation of the court, (2) to regulate members of the bench and bar and, lastly, (3) to ensure that the court functions efficiently and effectively provides for the fair administration of justice. *See Davis v. City of Sun Prairie*, 226 Wis. 2d 738, 749, 595 N.W.2d 635 (1999); *Flynn v. Department of Administration*, 216 Wis. 2d 521, 550-51, 576 N.W.2d 245 (1999).

This Court, in a series of cases, has strongly suggested that courts have the inherent authority to order expunction in appropriate situations. Wis. SCR 72 was amended in 1997 by adding § 72.06, which specifically describes the steps clerks of court are to follow in expunging court records. The amendment was in response to *State v. Anderson*, 160 Wis. 2d 435, 466 N.W.2d 681 (Ct. App. 1991), which in holding that evidence of an expunged conviction was not material to an attack on a witness's credibility also held that sealing the record was insufficient method of expungement. Instead, the Court adopted an attorney general's opinion requiring actual destruction when expungement applied. *Id.*, 160 Wis. 2d at 441-42. As a result of the addition of Wis. SCR § 72.06, court records expunged either pursuant to statute or court order are sealed and kept in the offices of clerks of court.

In *State v. Leitner*, 253 Wis. 2d 449, 472 - 473, 646 N.W.2d 341, 352 - 353 (2002), this Court held that expungement applies only to court records and not to

records of agencies other than the courts. Thus, in considering whether courts have the inherent authority to order expungement, it is now clear that expungement applies only to the records of the courts themselves and does not result in the destruction of any records and requires locating the actual expunged records in the offices of the clerks of courts.

The Wisconsin Supreme Court extensively discussed the inherent authority of the circuit courts in *In the Interest E.C.*, 130 Wis. 2d 376, 387 N.W.2d 72 (1986). The issue in *E.C.* was whether courts had inherent or equitable authority to order expungement of juvenile *police* records when a juvenile delinquency petition was eventually dismissed. *Id.*, 130 Wis. 2d at 379. The court held that circuit courts do not have the inherent authority to order expungement of *police* records, in large part because the records are under statutory control and under the authority of the chief of police.

[W]e conclude that authority to expunge juvenile police records, which are under statutory control and under the authority of City of Milwaukee Police Chief is not essential to the existence to the orderly function of a circuit court nor is it necessary to maintain the circuit court's dignity, transact its business or accomplish the purpose of its existence.

Id., 130 Wis. 2d at 387-88.

In contrast, the principles underlying the separation of powers require that courts, as a co-equal branch of government, have the power to control its own

records, especially when that control does not impinge on the authority of non-judicial agencies or on the ability of non-judicial agencies to perform their duties and responsibilities.

B. *The Application of Wisconsin Open Records Law to The Supreme Court Rules.*

According to Wisconsin law, if there is a "general open records request under § 19.35(1)(a), the record custodian, keeping in mind the strong legislative presumption favoring disclosure, must determine whether the requested records are subject to an exception that may or will prevent disclosure. [...] Two general types of exceptions may apply: statutory exceptions and common law exception." *Hemple v. City of Baraboo*, 284 Wis. 2d 162, 179 - 80, 699 N.W.2d 551, 560 (2005). "If neither a statute nor common law creates a blanket exception, the custodian must decide whether the strong presumption favoring access and disclosure is overcome by some even stronger public policy favoring limited access or non-disclosure." *Id.* at 180.

While under the common law there is a general right to inspect public records, this right is not absolute. *Nixon v. Warner Communications, Inc.*, 435 U.S. 589, 597-599 (1978); *Youmans v. Owens*, 28 Wis. 2d 672, 681, 137 N.W.2d 470, 474 (1965). There are numerous limitations upon the right of the public to examine

certain types of public records. *Youmans*, 28 Wis. 2d at 680. When the record custodian is the clerk of court, “[e]very court has supervisory power over its own records and files, and access has been denied where court files might have become a vehicle for improper purposes.” *Nixon*, 425 U.S. at 597.

In Wisconsin, all cases that address a right to access agree that the decision as to access is one best left to the sound discretion of the circuit court; a discretion to be exercised in light of the relevant facts and circumstances of a particular case. *Id.* at 597-599 citing, *Youmans v. Owens*, 28 Wis. 2d 672, 682, 137 N.W.2d 470, 474-475 (1965), *modified on other grounds*, 28 Wis. 2d 685, 139 N.W.2d 241 (1966).

In determining whether the presumption of openness is overcome by another public policy concern, a balancing test is applied, *i.e.*, “weighing the public policies not in favor of release against a strong public policy that public records should be open for review.” *Linzmeier v. Forcey*, 254 Wis. 2d 306, 317, 646 N.W.2d 811, 814 (2002). This Court has consistently recognized there is a strong public interest in protecting the reputation and privacy of citizens that favors non-release. *Linzmeier*, 254 Wis. 2d at 327-28; *Woznicki v. Erickson*, 202 Wis. 2d 178, 187, 549 N.W.2d 699, 703 (1996). While the Wisconsin Supreme Court has concluded that, although a person whose reputation is injured by the release of

an arrest record has no cause of action for invasion of privacy, "this fact does not *ipso facto* demonstrate that it is in the public interest to release such records." *Newspapers Inc. v. Breier*, 89 Wis. 2d 417, 432, 279 N.W.2d 179, 186 (1979).

IV. Addressing the Harm of Improper Use of Court Records By Clarifying the Court's Inherent Authority.

As this Court is aware, CCAP can be reviewed by anyone with internet access and the information contained on the website is regularly misused. CCAP publishes the original criminal case information regardless of the outcome of the case. Court records may also be open to public inspection at each county courthouse. To allow continued access to such easily misunderstood information, especially in cases in which the case was dismissed or there was a judgment of acquittal, poses the risk that such a record could be "a vehicle for improper purposes," whether intentional or not. *Nixon*, 435 U.S. at 597.

An individual who is charged with a crime, even if charges are later dismissed faces the negative credential of a court record which shows the initial charge. Likewise, a court record remains for an individual charged with a crime who was acquitted at trial. In either instance, the negative credential remains and can be easily misunderstood or misused by landlords, license providers and employers. Princeton University sociology professor Devah Pager has

summarized research on the “experimental approach to the study of criminal stigma” and found:

The most notable in this line of research is a classic study by Richard Schwartz and Jerome Skolnick in which the researchers prepared four sets of résumés to be presented to prospective employers for an unskilled hotel job. The four conditions included: (1) an applicant who had been convicted and sentenced for assault; (2) an applicant who had been tried for assault but acquitted; (3) an applicant who had been tried for assault, acquitted, *and* had a letter from the judge certifying the applicant’s acquittal and emphasizing the presumption of innocence; and (4) an applicant who had no criminal record. Employers’ interest in candidates declined as a function of the severity of the criminal record, though in all three criminal conditions - even with a letter from the judge “certifying the finding of not guilty and reaffirming the legal presumption of innocence” - applicants were less likely to be considered by employers than the non-criminal control. The findings of this study suggest that *mere contact with the criminal justice system can have significant repercussions, with records of “arrest,” “conviction,” and “incarceration” conveying a stigma differing in degree but not kind.* Several later studies, both in the United States and in other countries, have extended Schwartz and Skolnick’s design. Each of these studies reports a similar finding that, all else being equal, contact with the criminal justice system leads to worse employment opportunities.

DEVAH PAGER, MARKED: RACE, CRIME, AND FINDING WORK IN A ERA OF MASS INCARCERATION, 49 - 50 (The University of Chicago Press, 2007)(emphasis supplied).

Professor Pager goes on to note that:

Currently, even those states prohibiting discrimination on the basis of criminal background [including Wisconsin] continue to allow employers full access to information about criminal backgrounds [as Wisconsin does, generally], despite the fact that in most cases they are not supposed to use it. This policy is somewhat incongruous, especially given that other protected categories place corresponding restrictions on access to “incriminating” information: employers are not permitted to ask the age of applicants, nor their marital status; and information about the race of applicants, while often collected for EEOC reporting requirements, is always optional.

Id. at 154.

This petition seeks to codify the inherent authority of the courts to control

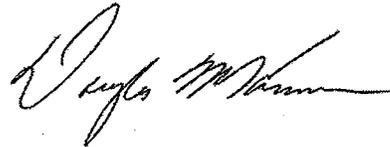
their own records, and provide a methodology for the use of such discretion, through a change to the Supreme Court Rules.

V. **Conclusion.**

The State Bar of Wisconsin seeks the proposed changes in order to clarify the authority of the trial court to exercise its "supervisory power over its own records and files" (*Nixon*, 425 U.S. at 597) in the manner described in the proposed revised Wis. SCR § 72.06. We therefore urge the Supreme Court of Wisconsin to adopt this Petition.

Respectfully submitted, October 27, 2009.

On Behalf of the State Bar of Wisconsin



Atty. Douglas W. Kammer

President, State Bar of Wisconsin